

Romeo and Richard III are enlisted in the casting wars

Two houses, both alike in dignity, have invoked ancient grudges and sparked new mutinies on the vexed question of who should play whom in drama. Both are theatres in London that have made headlines with Shakespearean leads. In different ways they suggest the commotion that casting decisions can cause, the benefits they can confer and the problems left unsolved. (...)

5 Across the Thames at Shakespeare's Globe, a new "Richard III" has set off another kind of ruckus. Michelle Terry, the theatre's artistic director, is the titular villain in an almost entirely female cast. She has received abuse for presuming, as a woman, to play a king. But gender is not the main flashpoint.

10 Rather it is the flouting of a new orthodoxy. This holds that, for reasons of authenticity and justice, disabled parts must be played by disabled actors (and trans parts by trans actors—and so on with other marginalised groups). Richard III is described and typically portrayed as disabled. Thus, the Disabled Artists Alliance protested, "This role belongs to us."

15 Like many battles in the culture wars, this is not a skirmish between lefties and reactionaries, but between progressives with diverging tactics. Committed to "anti-literalism" in casting, the Globe is a champion of inclusivity. Recently Francesca Mills, who has a form of dwarfism, was a sensational Duchess of Malfi. Nadia Nadarajah, who is deaf, will soon star in "Antony & Cleopatra".

20 If the Globe is the wrong theatre to berate, this is also the wrong show. Largely described in insults, Richard's physical affliction is sketchy in Shakespeare's text. Here almost all these references are excised; the focus is on the play's deep seam of misogyny. An able-bodied Richard glories in forcing the widow of a man he killed to marry him—then murders her. He hates women and, perceptively, they hate him back. The cross-gender casting makes you think anew about the play's macho violence.

25 Yet this show, too, has a tragic flaw. It wants you to see the parallels between Richard and bullies today, especially Donald Trump. Unfortunately it whacks you over the head with this analogy like a Plantagenet knight with a mace. It is anyway a flimsy comparison. True, both men are dangerous bosses to serve; both disparage norms and women. But the king is less a demagogue than a machinator. He is funnier than Mr Trump—and has a glimmer of conscience.

30 Shakespeare, and the stage, belong to everyone. By and large directors should cast whomever they think best for a role. Wanting to make a point or turn a profit is perfectly fine. All the same, these productions fall down for the same reason their critics are mistaken. A casting choice is the beginning, not the end, of telling a story. Making art involves much more than causing a stir.

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